

BOMBING the BOMBER

Giving Raiding Aircraft a Taste of their Own Medicine: A Suggestion for Modernising a Method of 1914-1915

By W. MACLANACHAN



The author suggests that fast bombers, such as Blenheims, could drop "aerial depth-charges" on raiding formations.

THE Air Ministry has consistently maintained that purely defensive measures cannot provide effective air defence and that our aggressive bombers will constitute the major portion of our defence.

In the long run this may be true, for it is undoubtedly essential to obstruct the enemy's supplies as much as possible and to attack his bases. In certain circumstances, however, it may become much more important for us, temporarily, to concentrate on defence proper.

One difficulty with modern air weapons in such a change of tactics is the specialist nature of the machines employed. Although most machines can carry bombs and can therefore be used for "aggressive defence," the bomber machines, except for the light bombers, cannot readily be converted into defensive weapons using the orthodox methods of attack. The R.A.F. has now seventy squadrons of bombers, and before another six months have passed a large proportion of these will be equipped with Blenheims, which is acknowledged to be the fastest bomber in any service.

With this preponderance of efficient aggressive machines it would obviously be an advantage if, in an emergency, they could be used as improvised weapons for defence proper.

Their armament in guns is adequate for their own defence, but in comparison with the performance of a fighter machine, costing much less and carrying only one instead of three or five of a crew, the risk in employing machines of the Blenheim type as fighters, except to avert an absolute calamity, would hardly commend itself to the authorities. The French and Americans have gone farther with their heavily armed multi-seater combat machines, but these are built essentially as fighters and have the necessary equipment of heavy machine guns.

The Suggestion

There is one method in which the Blenheims—and, for that matter, the other fast bombers—could be employed as auxiliaries to the fighters. That is, to use their bomb-carrying capacity to drop what are virtually aerial depth-charges on the attacking bombers.

At heights above 15,000 feet, and most certainly above 18,000 feet, pilots could drop time-fuse bombs on the enemy much more accurately than anti-aircraft guns could hope to fire shells, and from a height above the enemy that would render them reasonably safe from retaliatory fire from the hostile gunners.

There is nothing fantastic in the suggestion that, during daylight, formations of defending bombers can attack and break up raiding formations from a safe height before the latter are attacked by the fighter machines. The actual destruction of the enemy by this method would depend on

ANTI-AIRCRAFT bombing by fighters dates from the early war days, though, excepting perhaps in America, tactics and equipment for this method of attack have not been developed parallel with aerial gunnery. In Air Strategy, Lieut.-Gen. M. N. Golovine mentions as "an interesting line of development" the use of small bombs against large, or medium-sized aircraft, flying in formation, suggesting that rocket propulsion may be beneficial.

In the present article Mr. W. MacLanachan ("McScotch") proffers a suggestion with regard to the employment of anti-aircraft bombers in an emergency as auxiliaries to the fighters.

the enthusiasm, courage and ability of the individual, as would the destroying of a ship or any target that has to be attacked from a low height. The difference would be that with the additional height above that of the enemy and the fact that enemy gunners would have to fire practically vertically (a difficult task in a cramped cockpit), such a method of attack would require the minimum amount of courage to sight accurately on the target. In my own opinion, a height of approximately 1,000 feet would be adequate.

On the technical side, the employment of these tactics need not demand any alteration in the existing equipment, nor would it impair the efficiency of the machines for the purpose for which they were designed. The

only additional equipment necessary to convert an aggressive weapon into a purely defensive one would be the supplying of a time-fuse mechanism for the bomb as an alternative to the percussion one, and the adapting of the bomb-sight so that a height of 1,000 feet (or whatever is decided) can be quickly gauged, or the fitting of a special sight for the purpose.

Psychologically, the effect on the enemy would be disconcerting. The detonation of a 56-lb. or 112-lb. bomb within 100 yards is sufficient to make the stoutest pilot swerve and, from a height of 330 yards above an unwieldy formation, there is little likelihood of the error being so great as this. (I shall never forget the effect on myself of the explosion of a six-inch A.A. shell about 150 yards away. I never risked getting another so close.)

Easing the Way

If the bombing were successful, the work of fighter pilots would be simplified. It would also be less dangerous in that they would not be called on to face the concentrated fire of the enemy gunners, but would have the formation already broken up and in such a condition that ordinary fighting tactics could be employed.

There is nothing new in the idea—it was used in a primitive form during the war, before machines were equipped with machine guns—but with the greatly increased striking power of the 20-lb. or 112-lb. bomb in comparison with the jam-tin gunpowder bombs of 1914 and early 1915 there is no reason why the bomber machines should not be used for the purpose of bombing the enemy in the air.

In changing their tactical use there would be no greater "revolution" than that which occurred in 1917 when the first fighter was equipped with a bomb carrier. The great value in this mutation of purpose, providing alternative uses for the same craft, was particularly apparent in 1918 when low-strafting by fighter squadrons greatly accelerated the retreat of the enemy. A similar mutation in the opposite direction may prove of inestimable value in the first few weeks of any future war.